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INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COPENHAGEN 000063

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NSC FOR ANSLEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/17/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [IZ](#) [DA](#)

SUBJECT: DANES IN IRAQ: EDGING TOWARD THE EXIT?

REF: ANSLEY-KAISER 01/09/07 TELCON

Classified By: Ambassador James Cain, for reasons 1.4 b,d

¶11. (C) Summary: Recognizing growing domestic opposition, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen has signaled that Denmark hopes to join the British in scaling down its Iraq deployment by mid-2007, provided that Iraq forces can take over security responsibilities there. At the same time, the Danish government insists that it remains committed to supporting Iraq and the Coalition, and privately indicates an openness to extending its Iraq mission beyond the current mandate ending June 30. Rasmussen was proud to be one of the world leaders the President called before his January 10 speech. Although debate on this issue will not begin publicly until late spring, Danish policymakers are considering their options now. We will need to move quickly to convey clearly to the Danes our interests regarding a follow-on mission. Despite the increased pressure to withdraw, we have a chance to persuade the Danes to stay in Iraq, if we begin this conversation soon. End summary.

Danish Public Opinion Hardens on Iraq

¶12. (SBU) In Denmark, public concern over the course of the war in Iraq has grown in the past year, emboldening critics within the domestic political opposition. Roughly a third of Danes surveyed maintain that Denmark's engagement was the right decision, down from nearly fifty percent a year ago, and almost sixty percent of Danes now favor withdrawal, although less than 40 percent want an immediate pull-out. This decline in public support continues even despite relatively low numbers of Danish casualties (seven soldiers as of mid-January). Danish papers that traditionally support the Iraq deployment have been running more negative editorials on the conduct of the war than in months past.

¶13. (C) As Danish public concern grows, the opposition Social Democrats have stepped up their attacks on the Rasmussen government on Iraq, demanding an immediate withdrawal. In recent months, as the Social Democrats have pulled to a rough parity in the polls with the governing Liberals, these attacks have become increasingly sharp. Among the now-standard opposition charges are that Rasmussen has "blindly" followed President Bush and led Denmark into a foreign policy quagmire. The opposition is gaining ground mostly on domestic issues, but the attacks on Iraq are beginning to draw blood.

"President Bush and I Share the Same Vision for Iraq"

¶14. (C) PM Rasmussen and his team continue to shrug off these criticisms -- as well as any suggestions that Danish public regard for the U.S. could diminish as a result -- but they certainly feel the pressure. Anders Fogh Rasmussen is a

determined man, and not one to yield easily to such attacks, especially with elections not likely for another two years. However, we have seen a distinct shift in the last few weeks in the PM's tone on Iraq. In his New Year's address, Rasmussen expressed hope that 2007 will be the year when Iraqis will take over responsibility for their security and allow Britain and Denmark to reduce their forces in southern Iraq. Without retreating from his commitment to assist the Iraqis in "building a better life," the prime minister nevertheless began to speak frequently of the prospects for reducing the Danish troop presence. Danish government officials are emphasizing the progress in Iraq's southern provinces, where Danish forces are operating.

¶5. (C) Indeed, the principal reaction of the Danish government to President Bush's speech and our new Iraq policy -- beyond a cautious endorsement of the decision to surge -- has been to highlight the differences between the security situations in Baghdad and in southern Iraq. The Americans may well need to add more troops, runs the Danish government's reassuring line, but we and the British do not. Rasmussen used his January 9 telephone conversation with the President to communicate directly his desire to reduce the Danish troop presence as soon as conditions allow. Defense Secretary Gates's remarks at a NATO ministerial January 14

SIPDIS acknowledging a possible UK/Danish drawdown were headlined, "U.S. Prepared to Accept Danish Withdrawals," in the local press.

¶6. (C) Privately, Danish foreign ministry and military officials are optimistic that the final two provinces under their and U.K. control could be turned over to the Iraqis in the spring (forecasts differ among March, May and June). The Danes have not yet determined what level of reduction from

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the current battalion (about 440 troops) would be possible, other than that it would be "proportional" to any British reduction and make sense in terms of the mission. For their part, the Danish military remains enthusiastic about the Iraq deployment, emphasizing to us the value of the experience for their forces and their desire to maintain a robust overseas presence. In their planning, they are calculating continued troop rotations in Iraq beyond the expiration of the mandate.

Danish Iraq Deployment After June?

¶7. (C) Danish officials tell us that it remains "too early" to say whether the government will seek extension of parliament's Iraq deployment mandate when it expires at the end of June. With a resurgent opposition hammering the government over the unpopular war, it seems the Danes might take advantage of the mandate expiration to put an end to their engagement. However, few here -- including among left-leaning analysts -- are prepared to dismiss the possibility of a deployment extension.

¶8. (C) MFA security officials note that some sort of new parliamentary mandate will be needed, if only to cover the NATO training mission (some 20 Danish soldiers), which enjoys broad support in parliament -- including from the Social Democrats. Security for implementation of Denmark's remaining assistance projects (an additional 9 million USD was recently authorized by parliament) will also need to be addressed. Beyond that, Danish officials insist, any future Danish military mission will be shaped by as-yet-undetermined requirements and the need to secure backing in parliament. The Danish force, which officials hope will be reduced by June in any case, could be redirected toward training of Iraqi security forces, or could even serve as an over-the-horizon force -- the MFA's senior security policy director cautions that a post-June Danish mission might not even include "boots on the ground" in the traditional sense.

¶9. (C) There's no hope to bring the Social Democrats into a consensus vote on staying in Iraq, and the government fears other supporters may fade as well. The populist, right-wing Danish People's Party has long supported the Iraq deployments but is concerned about the worsening public mood. The current minority government needs the DPP's votes to extend the mandate. The head of parliament's foreign policy committee told us this week that they are close to reaching a preliminary agreement for the DPP's support, although questions about the very nature of the mission remain unsettled.

Clear Talk Key to Getting Danes to Stay in Iraq

¶10. (C) Keeping Danish troops deployed in Iraq beyond June will require clear messages from us (coordinated with the British) about our needs and expectations, the earlier the better. The Danes are not sure about what we are looking for from them after the current mission ends. Prime Minister Rasmussen reiterated last week that he "shares President Bush's vision for a free and democratic Iraq," and MFA officials assure us that they understand the importance of Denmark's remaining "in the Coalition." The exact nature of Denmark's continued engagement in Iraq, however, is less clear. Although public and parliamentary debate about a follow-on mission is not likely to begin before April, we should begin to engage the Danes now if we have any interest in shaping that mission.

¶11. (C) The weeks ahead offer many opportunities for consultation with the Danes on the way forward, including foreign and defense ministerials at which bilateral meetings or pull-asides could be arranged. Per reftelcon, the good relationship between NSA Stephen Hadley and Danish NSA-equivalent Bo Lidegaard could be a useful conduit for discussion, as could Danish Deputy FM Ulrik Federspiel's February 14-16 meetings in Washington. We recommend strongly, and have requested, an early meeting between Defense Secretary Gates and Danish Defense Minister Soren Gade (a stalwart ally and a good friend) on this and other issues, and we would welcome an early visit by a USG interagency Iraq team to Denmark. At a working level, we know that there are a number of fora, including the "Basrah Quint" meetings between us and Southern Iraq troop contributors. Finally, we at post are prepared to engage the Danes at the highest levels to shape and deliver any message regarding our expectations of Denmark in Iraq.

¶12. (C) We have an opportunity to persuade the Danish government to extend their mission in Iraq, at least in principle, but making that case will become increasingly

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difficult over time. If we are going to ask the Danes to stay in Iraq beyond the summer, then we need to do it soon.
CAIN